



washington state department of
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Growth Management Services

Measures for Providing Attractive, Compact Urban Areas



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Cover

Many communities, such as Tacoma, are seeing significant amounts of attractive, compact development occurring in urban growth areas.

Photo: Courtesy of Rita R. Robison

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Measures for Providing Attractive, Compact Urban Areas

Measures for Providing Attractive, Compact Urban Areas offers options for local governments to consider as they evaluate their comprehensive plans under the Growth Management Act (GMA).

Encouraging urban growth in urban areas and reducing sprawl are two key goals of the GMA. To achieve these goals, per capita land consumption rates must be low enough and compact development must predominate in urban areas. At the same time, people in those urban places need to be able to enjoy a high quality of life. They want growth and development to result in livable communities, a healthy environment, and a strong economy.

The following measures provide a partial list of tools local governments should consider using to provide for greater residential densities and employment-based development in urban growth areas (UGAs). They may be especially applicable if a local government is considering more ways to achieve urban infill or needing to “adopt and implement measures” to ensure consistency under the Buildable Lands Program [RCW 36.70A.215(4)].

Local governments in their GMA Updates also can use the measures. Each city and county planning under the GMA in Washington needs to take action to review,

and if necessary, revise its plans and regulations to ensure they comply with the GMA. The deadline to complete this requirement varies from county to county. The earliest deadline for some counties and cities for completing this requirement is December 1, 2004. If local governments find their UGAs are filling up faster than expected or growth is occurring at lower densities than they had planned for, the measures in this publication may be used to make the needed adjustments.

Local governments planning under the GMA also are required to review their UGAs, including densities, at least every ten years, and make changes if needed. In this Urban Growth Area Review, the county comprehensive plan designating UGAs and the densities permitted in UGAs by the comprehensive plans of the county and each city located within UGAs are to be revised to accommodate the urban growth projected to occur in the county for the next 20 years. *Measures for Providing Attractive, Compact Urban Areas* offers options local governments can use to increase densities.

For further information, contact Growth Management Services at (360) 725-3000.

Accessory Dwelling Units

- Recommendation: Encourage accessory dwelling units in UGAs.
- Potential Benefits: Accessory dwelling units (“granny flats,” etc.) provide another housing option for changing demographics. They preserve neighborhoods as local residents age and give them a smaller place to live while allowing them to stay in their neighborhood. Densities are increased within existing developed areas with minimal visual disruption.

Capital Facilities Investments

- Recommendations: Give priority to capital facility projects that most support urban growth at urban densities. Provide urban services to help reduce sprawl development and maintain the edge of the urban growth boundary.
- Potential Benefits: Phased, infill development is more cost effective than sprawl and helps retain rural and natural resource lands. Adequate infrastructure to support compact urban growth will help UGAs be livable, attractive places. Outside UGAs, rural lifestyles can be maintained better when infrastructure investments provide for rural needs without encouraging urban encroachment.

Clustering

- Recommendations: Encourage clustering techniques in UGAs where appropriate to ensure that infill development and future urban services can be provided cost effectively. Outside UGAs,

use clustering techniques where appropriate to help retain open space, critical areas, and natural resources, provided that the cluster does not provide for more growth than the underlying zone allows and that retained open areas are not redeveloped in the future.

- Potential Benefits: Clustering may allow more efficient use of land in addition to providing open space. The technique also encourages a neighborhood feeling. It allows critical areas to be protected while still permitting both urban and rural development.

Co-housing

- Recommendation: Allow co-housing as an innovative form of housing to encourage more housing choices in UGAs.
- Potential Benefits: It provides another choice in a variety of housing options.

Density Bonuses

- Recommendation: Allow higher density or intensity of development in UGAs than normally permitted as an incentive for achieving other community values such as affordable housing, mixed-use developments, infill, rehabilitating existing structures, etc.
- Potential Benefits: Bonuses can increase densities in urban areas and create an incentive for providing neighborhood amenities. They can also be used as receiving zones to preserve resource lands by buying or transferring development rights from rural to urban areas.

Design Standards

- Recommendation: Adopt design standards in targeted areas to encourage attractive compact development.
- Potential Benefits: They help ensure development is attractive, safe, and consistent with neighborhood character, historic preservation, or other desired features.

Downtown Revitalization

- Recommendations: Develop a strategy to encourage downtown vitality. Include techniques such as promoting mixed residential and commercial uses, reuse of existing buildings/inventory rather than tearing down and rebuilding, and alternative urban landscaping and infrastructure that encourage pedestrian use.
- Potential Benefits: It provides housing and employment options, reduces sprawl development by reusing land within developed areas and where services are already provided, increases economic opportunities, and contributes to more efficient use of land.

Duplexes, Townhomes, and Condominiums

- Recommendations: Permit duplexes, townhomes, and condominiums in both mixed-use and residential districts of UGAs.
- Potential Benefits: They provide additional affordable housing options and allow more residential units than would be achieved by detached homes along.

Economic Development Strategy

- Recommendation: Include a strategy for sustainable economic development in the local comprehensive plan. This strategy could include: a downtown revitalization program; incentives for development that meet local goals; transit and transportation system upgrades; enhancement of the natural resources base; an industrial needs assessment; and provisions for timely infrastructure. Intergovernmental, private sector, and regional collaboration is important in this effort.
- Potential Benefits: The strategy can encourage a healthy economy over the long term. A good strategy will help implement the community vision, consistent with resource considerations.

Environmental Review and Mitigation Built into the Subarea Planning Process

- Recommendation: Use this technique for targeted development areas.
- Potential Benefits: This approach expedites a project's permitting decisions while ensuring that infrastructure and environmental considerations are addressed during the planning phase.

Higher Allowable Densities

- Recommendation: Change the comprehensive plan and development regulations, as necessary, to encourage higher densities where they can be accommodated within UGAs.
- Potential Benefits: Higher densities, where appropriate, provide more housing, a greater variety of housing options, and a more efficient use of scarce land resources. Higher densities also reduce sprawl development and make the provision of services more cost effective.

Industrial Zones

- Recommendation: Limit non-industrial uses in industrial zones. For example, require that any commercial use be sized to primarily serve the industrial needs in the zone. Preclude residential use unless it is accessory to the industrial use.
- Potential Benefits: These limits help ensure that industrial land can be saved for future industrial needs.

Low Densities in Rural and Resource Lands

- Recommendations: Make sure that allowable densities in rural lands are low enough to discourage sprawl development. Generally this means one unit to five, 10, 20, or more acres in rural areas, except for established areas of more intense development [as identified in RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)]. Ensure that allowable densities in natural

resource lands are even lower to discourage sprawl development.

- Potential Benefits: Lower densities outside UGAs protect resource lands, promote development within UGAs where services will be available and are cost effective to provide, reduce sprawl development, and reduce reliance on cars for transportation.

Maximum Lot Sizes

- Recommendation: Establish maximum lot sizes, consistent with urban densities, for UGAs. This approach may be chosen instead of the “minimum density” approach.
- Potential Benefits: Maximum lot sizes can promote appropriate urban densities, efficiently use limited land resources, and reduce sprawl development.

Minimum Density Requirements

- Recommendation: Require in UGAs that residential development on a site must be built or located in a way that will allow the future achievement of specific minimum urban densities (e.g., five dwelling units per acre).
- Potential Benefits: Minimum densities promote developments consistent with local comprehensive plans and growth assumptions. They reduce sprawl development, eliminate underbuilding in residential areas, and make provision of services more cost effective. They also promote a more consistent neighborhood fabric, reduce street costs, create areas with a more pedestrian scale, and are more transit-friendly.

Mixed Uses

- Recommendation: Allow residential and commercial development to occur in many of the same buildings and areas within UGAs.
- Potential Benefits: This technique can provide a broader variety of housing options, allowing people to live, work, and shop in nearby areas. Mixed uses in the same area encourage more pedestrian and transit-friendly access, reduce the demand on transportation services and facilities, make goods and services accessible to non-drivers, and reduce peoples' dependence on vehicles for mobility.

Multifamily Housing and Tax Credits

- Recommendation: Provide tax incentives (e.g., property tax exemption program) for multiple-unit housing for targeted areas in certain urban centers as enabled by RCW 84.14.
- Potential Benefits: This encourages increased and improved residential opportunities within urban centers where there is insufficient housing. It is intended to stimulate new multifamily housing construction as well as rehabilitation of existing vacant and under-utilized buildings for multifamily housing targeting both renters and owners.

Narrow Streets

- Recommendations: Encourage or require street widths that are the minimum necessary to ensure that transportation and affordable housing goals can be achieved.

Meet public safety needs through design standards that keep traffic at a safe speed.

- Potential Benefits: Narrower streets slow neighborhood traffic and increase livability. They are more pedestrian friendly, enhance the sense of neighborhood, lower capital and maintenance costs, and make more land available to housing and economic-based development.

Phasing Urban Growth

- Recommendation: Incorporate strategies in comprehensive plans and capital facilities plans to phase urban growth as a way to provide for orderly development and encourage infill ahead of “urban fringe” development.
- Potential Benefits: This promotes development near existing urban services, reduces sprawl development, and reduces “hop-scotch” development. It also reduces capital spending, increases efficiency in providing capital facilities, promotes more orderly and cost-effective growth, and promotes more efficient use of scarce land resources.

Small Lots

- Recommendation: Allow or require small lots (5,000 square feet or less) for single-family neighborhoods within UGAs.
- Potential Benefits: Small lots limit sprawl, contribute to the more efficient use of land, and promote densities that can support transit. Small lots also provide expanded housing ownership opportunities to broader income ranges and provide additional variety to available housing types.

Transfer/Purchase of Development Rights

- Recommendation: Develop a program to encourage the purchase or transfer of development authority in order to increase urban densities and decrease non-urban densities within UGAs.
- Potential Benefits: These techniques can protect rural resource lands and reduce sprawl outside UGAs. They also may be used to protect critical areas while still allowing development on lots that contain unbuildable areas. They encourage the more efficient use of land and promote densities where they can be provided most cost effectively.

Transit

- Recommendations: Encourage livable urban communities and neighborhoods by providing public transit systems that are convenient and safe. Also encourage attractive transit-oriented development.
- Potential Benefits: Transit allows denser development with less traffic congestion, reduces dependence on single occupancy vehicles (SOV), and provides transportation options for broader segments of the population who cannot drive (elderly, disabled, children, low-income without vehicles, etc.). Transit-oriented development allows people to more easily use transit systems and helps businesses near transit stations be more accessible. When done well, the result will be desirable urban neighborhoods.

Urban Amenities for Increased Densities

- Recommendations: Identify and provide amenities that will attract urban development in UGAs and enhance the quality of life for urban residents and businesses. Include them as part of the local small lots, increased density, and affordable development package.
- Potential Benefits: Amenities, such as parks, trails, waterfront access, and cultural centers, enhance livability in denser areas. Amenities contribute to the overall design vision of the community and promote livability in UGAs.

Urban Centers and Urban Villages

- Recommendations: Use urban centers and urban villages to encourage mixed uses, higher densities, inter-connected neighborhoods, and a variety of housing types that can serve different income levels.
- Potential Benefits: These centers and villages provide locally focused shopping opportunities and urban amenities (parks, schools, civic buildings, etc.) together with increased densities which increase livability and reduce the dependence on SOVs. They are a more efficient use of land, encourage more transportation or mobility options (due to connected streets), and provide for urban services more cost-effectively. Centers and villages create integrated, more complete, and inter-related neighborhoods. These are in stark contrast to stand-alone tracts of single-use developments that are not related to nor connected to the rest of the community or adjacent neighborhoods. They also reduce

the need to drive across town for basic services and shopping.

Urban Holding Zones

- Recommendations: Use very low zoning in certain areas adjacent to or within the UGA where municipal services will not be available within the near future. This will help to phase future urban development in an orderly and cost-effective manner. If this zone is for planned residential use, shadow platting and clustering techniques may be used so that a person may still build a house while configuring the lot(s) so that future rights-of-way and sites for future densification are preserved. The remaining lot(s) or sites may be further developed to urban densities when urban services are available. If this zone is for planned industrial use, other kinds of land uses that would discourage future industrial development should not be allowed.
- Potential Benefits: Land in sizes suitable for future urban scale development is protected from sprawl development until municipal services are available to the site.

